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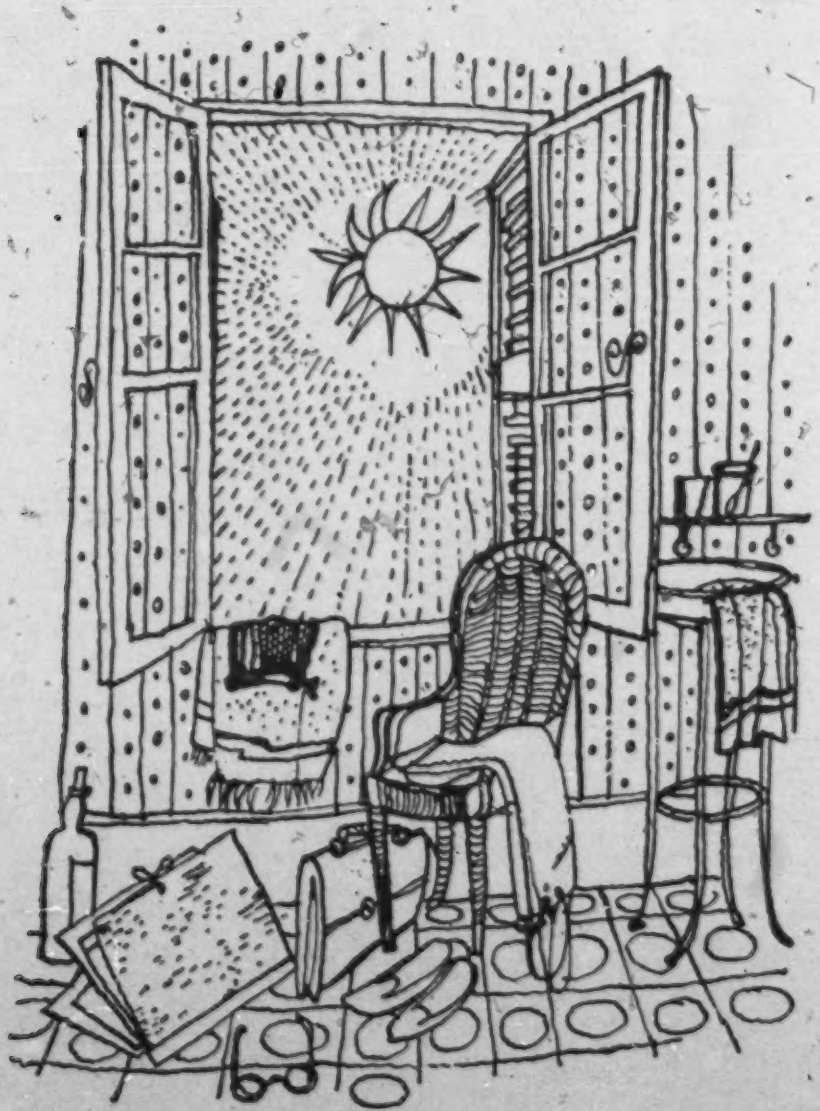
THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN



JOHN MINTON

1917-1957

Foreword

We cannot hope from a memorial exhibition of an artist's work soon after his death to arrive at an objective assessment of its true value; it is still too closely bound up with memories of the artist. This is particularly true in the case of John Minton whose vivid personality commanded in later years more attention than his work and whose virtuosity tended to obscure the fact that much of his drawing can hold its own with the best produced by English artists working in the Romantic tradition. Nevertheless the Council welcomed the suggestion to organize such an exhibition and although Minton's prodigality in giving his work away has made assembly and selection difficult, it is hoped that what is shown here will give a fair view of his *oeuvre*.

We are much indebted to the numerous public galleries and private owners who have made possible the London showing of this exhibition and also the provincial tour. Our thanks are due also to Mr Michael Middleton whose sympathetic introduction will add to our understanding of the artist. He is also responsible for the chronology.

G. W.

John Minton
1917-1957

AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS
DRAWINGS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The Arts Council of Great Britain
1958

Introduction

John Minton was born on Christmas Day 1917, in a round house near Cambridge; he died on 20th January 1957. The years between have already been worked into something of a myth.

Myths in this sense are most usually built, not upon achievement, but upon extravagances of appearance and personality and behaviour. These Minton had in abundance, so that the recollection of his presense remains sharp and clear, and comes easily to mind: the scarecrow figure with its loping, fevered stride, head down, chin stuck into chest, every fibre intent on getting wherever he was bound; the lantern face under the shock of hair, its extraordinary gravity in repose and its total re-creation in gaiety; the exuberant clowning into which was channelled, increasingly and defensively, a perpetual crackle of nervous energy.

To a peculiar degree Minton seems the embodiment and symbol of a particular aspect of a particular decade of London life and London painting. Yet the sometimes novelettish tenor of his life, the picture drawn of him by the popular press as one of the 'beat' generation—a sort of James Dean of painting—these can too easily obscure essentials and seem to justify the perfunctory pigeon-hole. Minton's frivolity was more apparent than real. Again and again, his early letters attest a deep seriousness towards his art. Painting was one of the few things, perhaps the only thing, in which he could believe as an end in itself, and he questioned at all times his own contribution to it with a shrewd and lively intelligence. As much as anything it was the lack of recognition from that part of the artistic 'establishment' which he respected which finally destroyed him.

Doubtless the outward contradictions of his life marked deeper ambiguities of temperament, but it is easier to list the stylistic influences that formed his artistic handwriting than to probe the environmental and psychological stresses that produced so intense an awareness of—I quote from an early letter—'the touching and melancholy iimpermanence of all physical beauty'.

The essential facts can be disposed of briefly. His father, a solicitor and a shadowy figure, belonged to the family that gave its name to the china firm; his mother appears to have lacked imagination. Both an elder and a younger brother predeceased him. Money was never a problem and, some years before his death, Minton inherited a considerable sum. His early training was done at the now defunct St John's Wood Art Schools. He went into the war as a conscientious objector, finally entered the army, was commissioned and invalided out in 1943. Thereafter he drew and painted prolifically, taught at three distinguished art schools, and travelled widely. Pictures by him are to be found at the Tate Gallery and in private and public collections in the provinces and abroad.

His artistic family tree is not more difficult to trace. Berman, Tchelitchew, de Chirico, Picasso, Sutherland, Samuel Palmer, Wyndham Lewis, Colquhoun and MacBryde, perhaps Lucien Freud, all influenced him at different times. Somewhere around 1938, Michael Ayrton, with whom he was to remain on close terms for the rest of his life, introduced him to Soby's 'After Picasso' and the Parisian neo-romantics therein decisively affected his development. All through the last, long, pre-war summer in France, he played with their emotive devices—the crepuscular

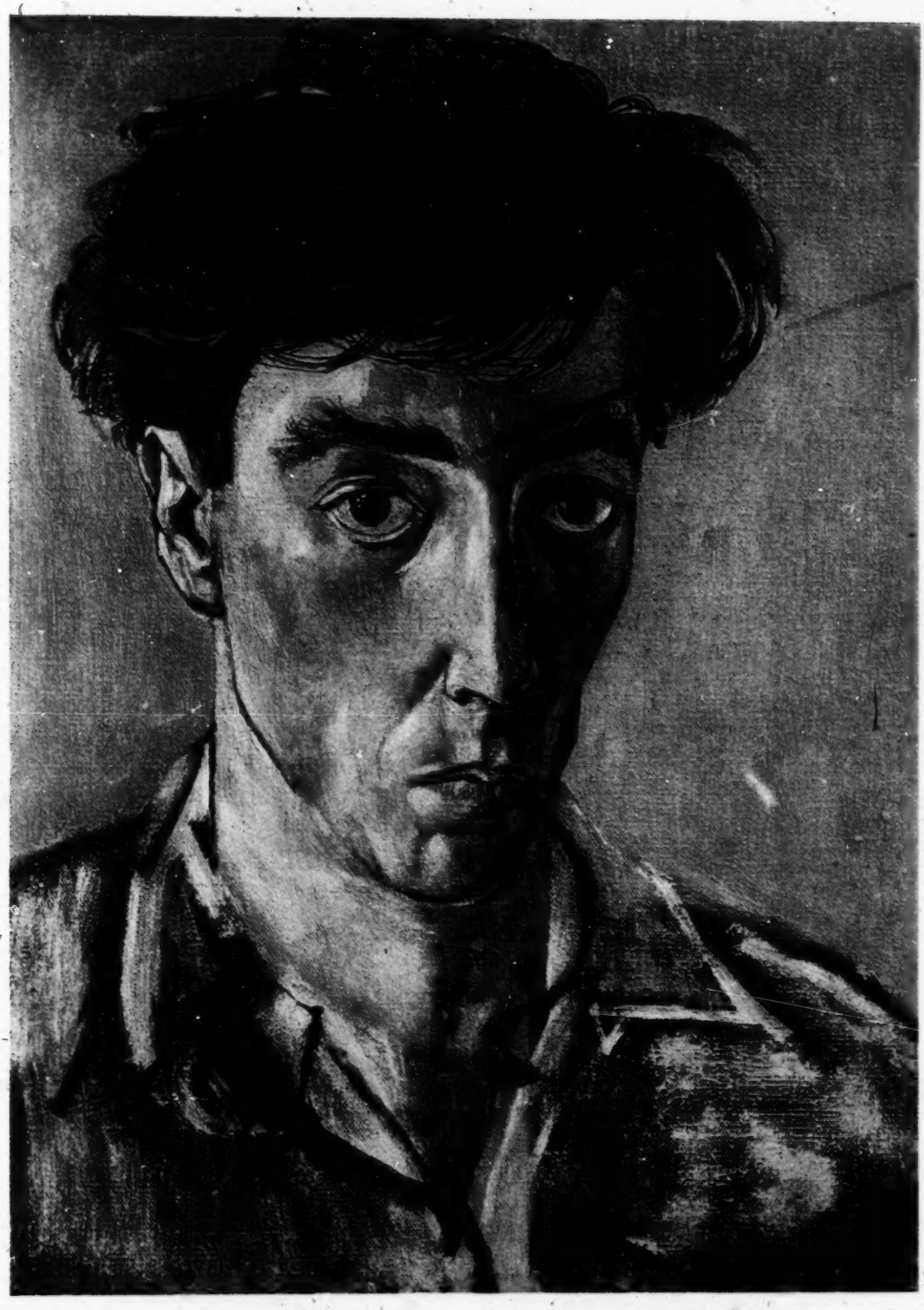


PLATE I *Self Portrait* 1953 [*Cat. no. 25*]

PLATE II *Surrey Landscape* 1944 [*Cat. no. 43*]

tonalities, the deep perspectives and long shadows, the preoccupation with sleep and shrouded figures, the torn flags and cracked walls and ruined vistas that were so soon to look prophetic.

Berman's Venice led to the mean streets of 1940. Minton at this time wandered extensively through the docks, in the hot summer days when the wisps of cloud and the barrage balloons were high; more often at night when the shelters were full and the moonlit perspectives were empty and London was at its most beautiful. He was to return to the river for his subject matter many times after the war: for me, however, these early works, unashamedly sentimental, retain a sharp and poignant validity.

More intensely than any other English painter since Sickert, Minton apprehended certain aspects of the urban romantic. Yet his response to nature was no less immediate and he found great joy in pure landscape. The drawings he made towards the end of the war are among his most lyrical works; the notebooks of his travels are as full of charm as those of Edward Lear.

It was however the problem posed by the figure in its setting which seemed to him of paramount importance. From 1943 onwards he sought a means of bringing the two into effective formal relationship. He braced his work with the bones and sinews of Robert Colquhoun's linear formalizations, adopting at the same time the rich sonorities of a not dissimilar palette—so 'English' to foreign eyes. It is from these middle years, say from 1944 to 1950, that most of his best work belongs. The linear patterning is seen at its most extreme, its most freakish even, in 1946. His mature style, based upon the careful building up of generalized particulars, was employed mainly in exotic landscape, in the portrayal of his friends and students—superb examples at their best of unforced draughtsmanship—and in the vast set-pieces intended for the Royal Academy, which were patently and intentionally academic exercises.

Minton's capacity for work was prodigious. Between 1945 and 1956 he had no fewer than seven one-man shows at the Lefevre Gallery (then largely under the lively direction of Duncan Macdonald), apart from his contributions to group exhibitions at home and abroad. From 1943 onwards he gave much of his time to teaching. Drawings for books, periodicals and advertising flowed from him steadily. There was little he did not tackle at some time or another, from wallpaper to theatrical décor. His romantic invention and shrewd grasp of practicalities fitted him ideally for theatre design and it is a matter for regret that the West End does not offer opportunities comparable to those in Paris which make possible reputations like those of Clavé or Carzou. Minton made many enchanting designs for parties and balls—including a Chelsea Arts Ball—but, apart from Gielgud's war-time *Macbeth* on which he collaborated with Michael Ayrton, only one play ever came his way. Ballet surely lost a major opportunity here.

The immediacy of theatrical experience attracted him, as did the contact it offered, together with other forms of commercial design, with a wider public. He had the sense, common enough in the artist, of being the detached observer, *in* the scene but not *of* it. The search for new stimuli in exotic places and the febrile manner of living reflected a longing to escape self-consciousness and to live in the moment. He was for ever dashing off, afraid he might be missing something round the corner—another party, an evening at the Jazz Club, a drink on the Soho circuit.

Life, people, evoked an immediate response in him (which was why he struck such an answering chord in the hearts of his students). He felt bitterly all cruelties, stupidities and waste, and ranged himself passionately on the side of the misfits and the dispossessed. In twenty years I never heard him say a hurtful thing about anyone he knew. His generosity was almost pathological and scores of chance pub acquaintances found him a 'soft touch'.

And yet, with all this, he was an intolerably lonely man; in many ways an austere man (the prodigality with which he ran through large sums of money was not reflected in his own background); certainly a man who needed to belong, to be accepted (as his curious love-hate relationship with the Royal Academy showed). At a deeper level, I suppose it might be argued that the decorative nature of so much of his work—he was incapable of making an ugly mark on paper or canvas—betrays a certain desire to please that inhibited in him the abandon of blind faith. As the tide of fashion moved on, he clearly felt himself increasingly out of touch with current judgements, his sense of direction going, his doubts redoubled. His last exhibition was a failure. He threw up his job at the Royal College and slid into the final, grisly year.

'Recently', he wrote—the letter dates from 1944—'I have been very excited about painting and though I may never do anything I will never stop now.' But in retrospect, as with Kit Wood, Gertler and the others, death seems to have shadowed him from the beginning.

Have I perhaps failed after all to indicate the real basis of the myth? It was simply the charm and sweetness of Minton's character and the fact that he was tremendous fun to be with. Of those younger artists who seemed, at the end of the war to hold so much promise for the future of British painting, Minton was the most lyrical and elegiac. I believe that the best of his work, uneven though his total output was, will find its modest place not only in the history of that particular decade but in the wider traditions of English landscape and graphic art as a whole. Yet even the best of it seems less than the young man I once knew, so ardent, so gay, so talented.

MICHAEL MIDDLETON

John Minton: chronology

1917	Born 25 December, in Cambridgeshire; son of Francis Minton, solicitor, and Kate (née Key).
1925-35	Educated Northcliffe House, Bognor Regis and Reading School, Berkshire.
1935-8	Studied under P. F. Millard at St John's Wood Art Schools; exhibited with student group at Wertheim Gallery in last year; work influenced by de Chirico.
1938-9	Spent eight months in France, mostly in Paris and les Baux de Provence; much of the time with Michael Ayrton and Michael Middleton, with whom he shared a studio in Paris; returned to London immediately prior to outbreak of war. Greatly influenced by French neo-romantic painting; saw Tchelichew's décor for Giraudoux's 'Ondine'.
1940	Registered as a conscientious objector. Painted London street scenes and aerial perspectives.
1941	Worked with Michael Ayrton on costumes and décor for John Gielgud's production of *Macbeth*, Piccadilly Theatre. Withdrew conscientious objection; called into Pioneer Corps in late autumn.
1942	Exhibited with Michael Ayrton, Leicester Galleries.
1943	Commissioned; released from army in summer. Worked with Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, with whom he shared a studio until 1946; began teaching Illustration at Camberwell School of Art. Influenced by Palmer and Sutherland.
1945	Exhibited at Roland, Browse and Delbanco; also at Lefevre Gallery.
1946	For the following six years shared a house with Keith Vaughan. Moved with William Johnstone from Camberwell to Central School of Arts and Crafts, where he taught Drawing and Illustration.
1947	Visited Corsica with Alan Ross. Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery; illustrated first book *The Wanderer*.
1948	Left Central School for reorganized Royal College of Art, where he was Tutor, Painting School. Travelled in Spain.
1949	Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery; first showed at the Royal Academy summer exhibition with 'The Harbour'; elected member of the London Group.
1950	Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery. Travelled for six months in the West Indies.
1951	Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery.
1952	Travelled in Morocco.
1954	Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery. Visited Spain with Rodrigo Moynihan.
1956	Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery. Obtained leave of absence from Royal College of Art to devote himself to theatre décor; designed settings for *Don Juan in Hell*, Royal Court Theatre.
1957	Died, 20 January.

Catalogue

L indicates that the work is exhibited in London only

OILS

1 STILL LIFE 1935-36
20×24 in.
Lent by P. F. Millard, Esq.

2 STILL LIFE 1937
20×26 in.
Lent by Mrs Mounsey

3 THAMES 1938
16×20 in.
Lent by Mrs Mounsey

4 THE ALL CLEAR 1941
20×30 in.
Lent by Mrs George R. Foa

5 LAMBETH 1941
16×20 in.
Lent by F. Elt, Esq.

6 A STREET IN POPLAR 1942
20×24 in.
Lent by Miss Nancy Haig

7 CORNISH LANDSCAPE 1945
11×15 in.
Lent by Keith Vaughan, Esq.

8 CHILDREN BY THE SEA 1945
40×30 in.
Lent by Michael Ayrton, Esq.

L 9 STREET AND RAILWAY BRIDGE 1946
18×24 in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery

10 CRANES ON THE SOUTH BANK 1946
20×30 in.
Lent by Richard Gorer, Esq.

11 BOY AND WINDOW 1947
20×30 in.
Lent by Robert Hunt, Esq.

12 PORTRAIT OF ERIC VERRICO 1947
42×32 in.
Lent by Miss Muriel Belcher

13 CORSICAN CEMETERY 1948 Plate III
24×30 in.
Lent by Mrs E. Lamont

14 CORSICAN LANDSCAPE 1948
30×24 in.
Lent by the Hon. Hanning Philipps

15 CORSICAN LANDSCAPE 1948
21⅜×31 in.
Lent by Rugby Corporation

16 CORSICAN FISHERMAN 1948
39¼×49 in.
Lent by J. J. A. Caunt, Esq.

L 17 NIGHT FISHING IN SPAIN 1949
21¼×27 in.
Lent by Michael Hemans, Esq.

18 THE BULLFIGHTER 1949
29×19 in.
Lent by Alan Ross, Esq.

19 THE ROAD TO VALENCIA 1949
27½×38½ in.
Arts Council Collection

20 FISHING CANOE 1951
24×29½ in.
Lent by Miss Margot Grahame

21 NEVILE WALLIS 1952
48×60 in.
Lent by Brighton Art Gallery

22 PORTRAIT OF NORMAN BOWLER 1952
50×40 in.
Lent by Norman Bowler, Esq.

L 23 THE DEATH OF NELSON 1952
72×96 in.
Lent by the Royal College of Art

L 24 PORTUGUESE CANNON, MAZAGAN, MOROCCO 1953
60×45 in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery

25 SELF PORTRAIT 1953 Plate I
14×10 in.
Lent by Leicestershire Education Committee

26 BARCELONA 1954
24×20 in.
Lent by Leonard Cohen, Esq.

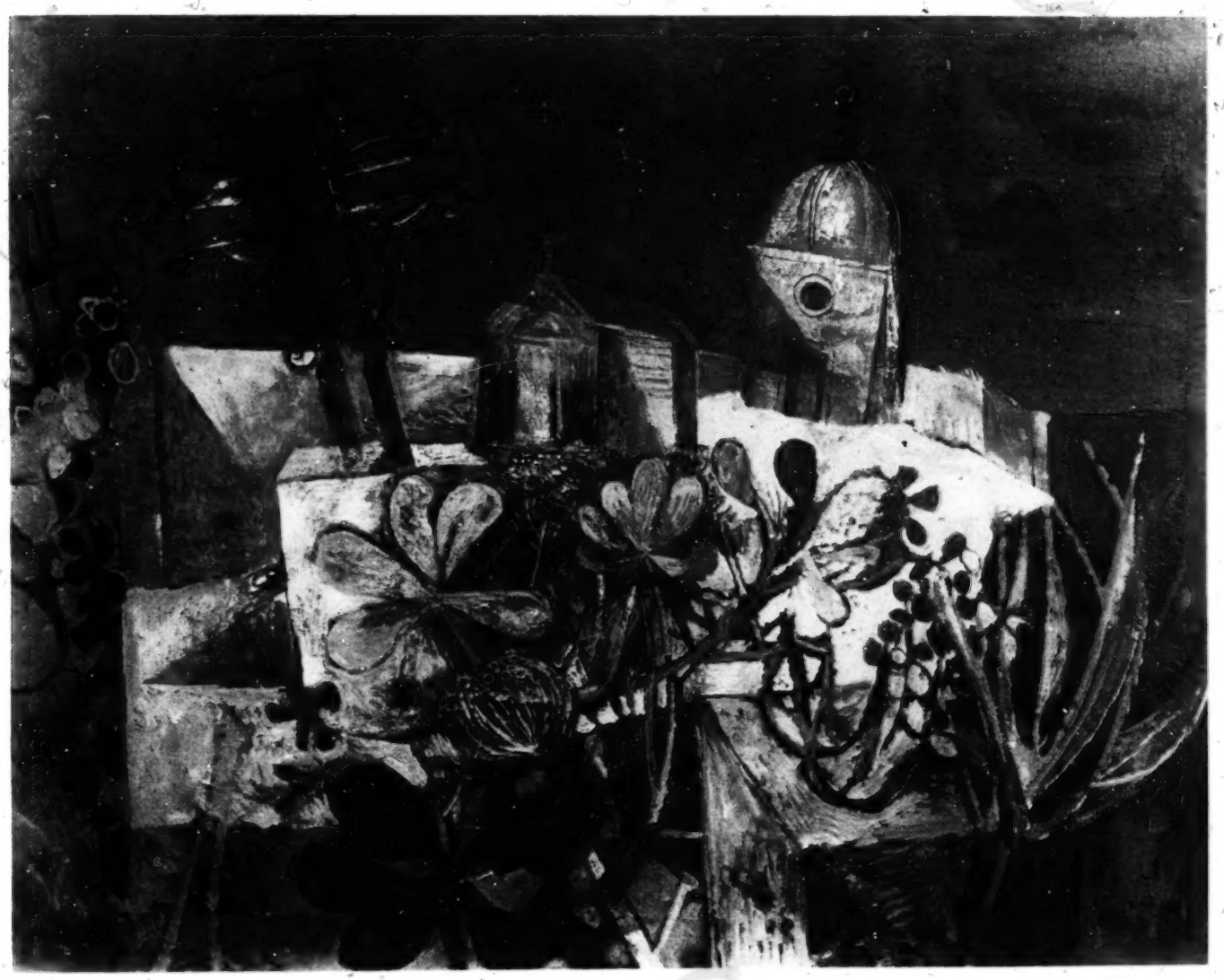


PLATE III *Corsican Cemetery* 1948 [*Cat. no. 13*]

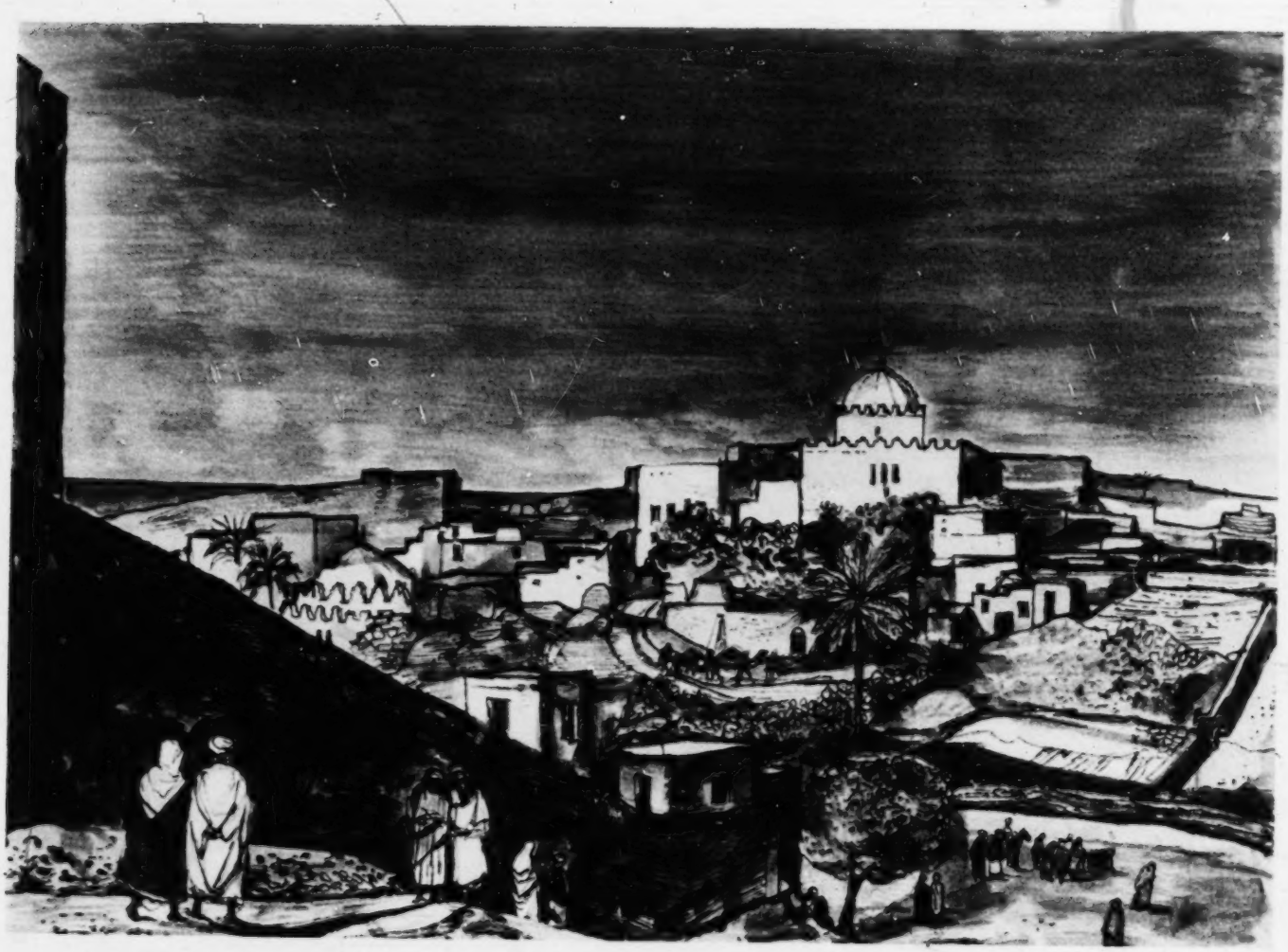


PLATE IV *Safi* 1953 [*Cat. no. 68*]

L 27 THE GAMBLERS 1954
72×120 in.
Lent by the Royal College of Art and the English Stage Company

L 28 CORIOLANUS 1953
72×60 in.
Lent by the Royal College of Art and the English Stage Company

29 KEVIN MAYBURY 1956
51×39 in.
Lent by Miss Susan Einzig

GOUACHES WATERCOLOURS DRAWINGS

30 PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER (AFTER EL GRECO) 1939
Ink and wash 15¼×10¼ in.
Lent by Michael Ayrton, Esq.

31 THE OUTSKIRTS 1941
Ink and wash 19×24½ in.
Lent by P. F. Millard, Esq.

32 RAILWAY AT CAMDEN TOWN 1941
Ink and wash 11×15 in.
Lent by Michael Ayrton, Esq.

33 LAMBETH STREET I 1941
Ink 7¼×9¼ in.
Lent by F. Elt, Esq.

34 LAMBETH STREET II 1941
Ink 6¾×8¾ in.
Lent by F. Elt, Esq.

35 SOLDIER RESTING 1942
Ink 10¾×9½ in.
Lent by Michael Ayrton, Esq.

36 STREET IN LIVERPOOL 1942
Ink 10¾×15¼ in.
Lent by Michael Ayrton, Esq.

L 37 ROAD TO THE SEA 1943
Gouache 19½×25 in.
Lent by John Lehmann, Esq.

38 LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURE 1943-44
Ink and gouache 20×25 in.
Lent by Keith Vaughan, Esq.

39 GREAT MISSENDEN 1944
Ink and wash 10½×15 in.
Lent by F. Elt, Esq.

40 FIGURE IN LANDSCAPE 1944
Gouache 17×22 in.
Lent by Mrs E. Lamont

41 RECOLLECTION OF WALES 1944
Ink and gouache 19½×24½ in.
Lent by the British Council

42 THE GATE 1944
Ink and wash 11×14¾ in.
Lent by the Ashmolean Museum

43 SURREY LANDSCAPE 1944 Plate II
Indian ink and wash 21¼×29¼ in.
Arts Council Collection

44 MARSHALLS GARDEN 1945
Indian Ink 10¾×14¾ in.
Lent by Mrs E. Lamont

45 THE ORCHARD 1945
Ink and watercolour 10½×14¼ in.
Lent by Dr Henry Roland

46 CORNISH HARBOUR 1945
Conté crayon 14×20½ in.
Lent by Messrs Roland, Browse and Delbanco

47 RIVER SCENE 1946
Ink and wash 10½×14½ in.
Lent by F. Elt, Esq.

48 LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURE 1946
Indian ink 10×13½ in.
Lent by Captain Sir Malcolm Bullock

49 BARGE AND WAREHOUSE 1946
Watercolour 10×15 in.
Lent by John Lehmann, Esq.

50 THE CRANE 1947
Ink and gouache 11¼×15 in.
Lent by Michael Ayrton, Esq.

51 LONDON'S RIVER 1947
Ink 10½×14½ in.
Lent by John Lehmann, Esq.

52 FIGURES IN THE WIND 1947
Ink and wash 5¾×8¾ in.
Lent by F. Elt, Esq.

53 PORTRAIT OF ALAN ROSS 1947
Ink 12×10½ in.
Lent by Alan Ross, Esq.

54 LONDON'S RIVER 1947
Watercolour 14×10 in.
Lent by Alan Ross, Esq.

55 NUT TREES, KENT 1947
Indian ink wash and crayon
10½×14½ in.
Lent by the British Man-Made Fibres Federation

56 PORTRAIT OF ROBERT HUNT 1947
Pencil 10×9 in.
Lent by Robert Hunt, Esq.

57 SELF PORTRAIT
Pencil 11×9 in.
Lent by F. Matthiesen, Esq.

58 FARM EQUIPMENT 1948
Ink and watercolour 10½×14¾ in.
Lent by Mrs Oliver Brown

59 BOATS AT VALENCIA 1949
Indian ink and watercolour 10½×14½ in.
Lent by Martyn Goff, Esq.

L 60 ALGECIRAS 1949
Watercolour 11×15 in.
Lent by Alan Ross, Esq.

61 FRENCH SEAPORT 1950
Ink and watercolour 10¾×14¾ in.
Lent by the West Riding of Yorkshire Education Committee

L 62 HOPEWELL ESTATE, DISCOVERY BAY 1950
Watercolour 15×11 in.
Lent by Alan Ross, Esq.

63 THE RIVER, PAPINO 1950
Indian ink and watercolour 15×10½ in.
Lent by Mrs E. Lamont

64 TOWER BRIDGE 1951
Indian ink 12½×10¾ in.
Lent by Richard Garnett, Esq.

65 MOROCCAN LANDSCAPE 1953
Watercolour 11×15 in.
Lent by Robin Darwin, Esq.

66 MOGADOR I 1953
Watercolour 16×19 in.
Lent by the Junior Common Room of Somerville College, Oxford

67 MOGADOR II 1953
Watercolour 16×19 in.
Lent by the Junior Common Room of Somerville College, Oxford

68 SAFI 1953 Plate IV
Ink and crayon 11×15 in.
Lent by Oldham Art Gallery

69 SKETCH FOR PORTUGUESE CANNON 1953
Gouache 15×11 in.
Lent by John Lehmann, Esq.

70 THE RAMPARTS, MOGADOR 1953
Ink and watercolour 10½×15 in.
Lent by Timothy Tufnell, Esq.

MISCELLANEOUS

71 FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR RADIO PLAYS AND OPERAS: (1) Tomorrow's Prisoner. (2) Carmen. (3) The Queen and the Rebels. (4) That Lady. (5) The Lady from the Sea.
Indian ink
Lent by the Radio Times

72 NINE BOOK JACKETS
Lent by Messrs Methuen, Rupert Hart-Davis, Michael Joseph, Martin Secker & Warburg

73 TREASURE ISLAND: illustration for the publication by Paul Elek 1947
Indian ink 8½×5½ in.
Lent by Paul Elek, Esq.

74 THE WANDERER (translation of *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier): seven illustrations for the publication by Paul Elek 1947
Jacket (watercolour). Six (indian ink)
Lent by Paul Elek, Esq.

75 MATADOR 1949
Lithograph 18½×23½ in.
Lent by Rex Nan Kivell, Esq.

76 ELEPHANT BILL: book-jacket for the publication by Rupert Hart-Davis 1950
Ink and watercolour
Lent by Messrs Rupert Hart-Davis

77 LONDON'S RIVER 1951
Watercolour 40×25 in.
Lent by London Transport Executive
(Design for a poster for London Transport)

78 Design for the décor of the Bal des Refusés at the Royal College of Art 1954
Gouache 9¼×23 in.
Lent by Ruskin Spear, Esq., R.A.

79 EILEAN DONAN CASTLE 1956
Ink, watercolour and crayon
15×12¾ in.
Lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum
(Design for a poster for the General Post Office)

80 DON JUAN IN HELL: two costume designs 1956
Watercolour 14¼×10¾ in.
Lent by Ronald Duncan, Esq.

81 ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT: book-jacket for the publication by Rupert Hart-Davis 1957
Ink and watercolour
Lent by Messrs Rupert Hart-Davis

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Miss Muriel Belcher
Norman Bowler, Esq.
Brighton Art Gallery
The British Council
British Man-Made Fibres Ltd.
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Oxford. Somerville College, Junior Common Room
Oxford. Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum
The Hon. Hanning Philipps
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